

4-1-1970

Scottish Poetry in 1969

Alexander Scott
Glasgow University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scott, Alexander (1969) "Scottish Poetry in 1969," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, 211–228.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol7/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

ALEXANDER SCOTT

Scottish Poetry In 1969

A good year with regard to verse in English, but disappointing where Scots was concerned, 1969 got off to a bright beginning in January with the "Translation" issue of the poetry magazine *Akros* (No. 9), perhaps the best issue to date of that stimulating periodical, and one which included work in both the Lowland languages. The number was also characteristic of the year as a whole in so far as it was dominated by the outstanding talent of Iain Crichton Smith (b. 1928), who continued throughout the twelvemonth to be both the most prolific and the most consistently powerful contributor of verse to the Scottish literary reviews.

His *Akros* translation of the greatest of eighteenth-century Gaelic poems on the natural scene, Duncan Ban Macintyre's "Ben Dorain," embodies a command of verse forms and musical harmonies scarcely inferior to the original *tour de force*. Only a poet possessing superb technical virtuosity could translate Macintyre's variations on a landscape and its denizens with any adequacy, for the work represents—as Mr. Crichton Smith remarks in a penetrating and provocative introduction—"the Gaelic language at its peak." Fortunately, the poem's present translator is not only a technical virtuoso but a man of profound and sensitive feeling, and the result is an English version of a Gaelic masterpiece which is a great poem in its own right—

so clear and so active
so pure and creative
with innocent motive.

The acclaim which greeted the magazine appearance of this dazzling translation resulted in its subsequent issue as a separate pamphlet—which soon reached a second edition—by Akros Publications (Preston, Lancashire).

A second bow as translator was made by Mr. Crichton Smith in March, when No. 29 of the poetry magazine *Lines Review* (M. Macdonald, Edinburgh) published sixteen of his subtle and scintillating English versions of work from the brilliant modern Gaelic sequence of love-poems, *Dain do Eimhir* by Sorley Maclean (b. 1911), who is generally regarded as the greatest of twentieth-century writers of Scots

Gaelic. Nine original poems by Mr. Crichton Smith in the same issue demonstrate his formidable versatility. His view of contemporary Scotland is without illusion; yet, finding himself stuck with being a Scot, he also discovers in himself a love of country which is all the more passionate for having had to struggle against reluctance.

To have fallen in love with
stone, thistle and strath,
to see the blood flow
in wandering old rivers,
this wound is not stanced
by handkerchiefs or verse.
This wound was after all
love and a deep curse.

The next number of *Lines*, for June, described itself as a "Special Issue of new work by Iain Crichton Smith" and offered twenty-one of his English poems, a sequence of thirty-nine shorter pieces in English called "Transparencies," and an extended Gaelic poem, "Am Faigh a' Gaidlig Bas?" ("Shall Gaelic Die?")—for Mr. Crichton is unique among contemporary Scottish poets in working equally well in the northern and southern languages. A critic less appreciative of the high quality of his work than the present writer might describe him as a parochial poet, in the sense that many of his best poems issue from his personal experience of particular people and places in the Highlands, and *Lines* 29 begins, aptly enough, with the ubiquitous Old Woman who haunts so much of his writing, both in verse and prose. Here she is an "Old Woman with Flowers," in a still life which yet throbs with agonised pity for an existence narrowed to childish possessiveness. Almost immediately, however, there follows a poem for a "Practical girl, worker of cloth and silver," whose vital versatility is contrasted with the writer's own single "obsessional talent" through images which transmute individual details into aspects of universal truths.

From observation of such familiar figures as runners at a school sports "stretching for a prize they might not have/ for more than a moment," or schoolgirls in summer "brimming each day with more and more of their wine," or a bank-clerkess who is "unbuyable/ with any currency/ but youth," the poet's imaginative range moves out to explore the mysterious wonder of living. Similarly with places—Glasgow, "cauldron of shapeless fire"; the house in "slummy Dumbarton" where "everything had a padlock and chain"; and the council estate with its "uniform sparkle"—such ordinary scenes, viewed through an eye with an unerring insight into essential detail, become quite extraordinary in their reflection of the troubled face of the world at large.

¹ A Scottish comedian (or "Scoatch coamic").

imperfectly-analytical intellect, and expressed through images which at once embody and enhance their subjects. The second poem, contrasting religion's gloom and passion's glory, finds the exact reflection of that contrast by counterpointing the dreariness of the Free Kirk manse against the deliciousness of its garden; in the sixth, "Hamlet," the world is a chaos of distorting mirrors where "Images bounce madly against reason/ as, in a spoon, wide images, fat and jolly"; in the eighteenth, the indissoluble association of horror and beauty is expressed through the savage killing of a zebra, torn to pieces by wild dogs while the rest of the herd retires to safety "Where the great suns of God intensely burn"; in the twenty-first, "At the Sale," the panic fear of time passing pounces from the paraphernalia of an auction in an old house; in the twenty-fifth, a watch presented at retirement reveals "the howling faces of eternity"; and in the thirty-fourth, the other eternity—of great art—is at once a feather and a flame, as "the hammered poetry of Dante turns/ light as a wristwatch, bright as a thousand suns." To a poet capable of such revelations, far more unequal writing can be forgiven than is contained in some parts of *From Bourgeois Land*. The sequence received a publication award from the Scottish Arts Council.

Scarcely less prominent than Mr. Crichton Smith in the year's periodicals, Edwin Morgan (b. 1920) also made the first of his 1969 appearances in the "Translation" issue of *Akros*, with two poems on Brooklyn Bridge finely translated from the Russian of Mayakovsky (into Scots) and the Spanish of Lorca (into English).² But it is one of the many mysteries of our age and state that while Mr. Morgan employs Scots for translation, and handles it in masterly fashion, all—or virtually all—his original work is in the other tongue. Perhaps it is all the more fitting, then, that the extended poem which he contributed to the April issue of *Scottish International* (of which he is co-editor), and which was later republished in the annual anthology *Scottish Poetry* (of which he is also co-editor), is entitled "London."

In the first of this remarkable work's three parts, "St. James' Park," a dream of love "in London's orient wheat" develops into a nightmare of denial—"When we have lost time we have lost everything"; in the second, "Soho," denial desolates the waking world while the poet manoeuvres the so-called "permissive society" into condemning itself out of its own maw by means of a deliberately-designed jumble of titles from advertisements and volumes in the windows of pornographic bookshops—a technical feat of dazzling dexterity; and in the third,

² The same issue of *Akros* also published Mr Morgan's acute essay, "Three Views of Brooklyn Bridge."

"The Post Office Tower," a panoramic view of the city combines with close-ups of the human activity (and inactivity) which give the place more than a local habitation and a name. Throughout this poem, Mr. Morgan's art is as carefully controlled as his artfulness, and his combination of wit and sympathy is at once highly individual and deeply moving.

His extended poem on Glasgow, "Rider," published in *Scottish International* 8 (November), might be described by an unimpressed critic as "too artful by half." A bravura piece, "showing phantom apocalyptic horsemen haunting that most positive of cities"—a description which carries the authority of one of Mr. Morgan's co-editors—it demonstrates this poet's customary (if unusual) technical expertise, but readers unacquainted with the minutiae of nineteenth-century Glasgow verse will find it impossible to understand, and the references to the writer's associates are as embarrassing as the book-scratchings of the Auden-Spender-Day Lewis axis in the early thirties.

A fifty-page selection from Mr. Morgan's recent verse appears in *Penguin Modern Poets* 15 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex), and while most of the poems are drawn from his two 1968 collections, *The Second Life* and *gnomes*,⁸ the ten which have not been collected before provide admirable evidence of his strengths and weaknesses. Fantastic futuristic humour in "Frontier Story"; scintillating social satire in "The Flowers of Scotland"; symbolic strength wedded to elegaic elegance in "Ché"; pictorialism and passion in "For Bonfires"; the interweaving of exoticism and homeliness—"a hoot from the Clyde"—in the love-lament "Floating off to Timor"—all of these are variously excellent. But some of the other love-poems lack the passion which would fuse their details into unified significance, and his "word-play" pieces smack of the literary exercise. Among other things, Mr. Morgan is sometimes a great tease, and he is at his most teasing in a colourful series of proverbial-cum-pictorial ingenuities, *Proverb Folder* (Openings Press, Woodchester, Gloucestershire).

While Norman MacCaig appeared less frequently in the reviews than the preceding poets, he produced the best collection, *A Man in My Position* (Chatto and Windus and The Hogarth Press, London). Published only fifteen months after his last volume, this inevitably contains among its fifty-one poems some which are less successful than others, but the failures serve only to throw the far more frequent successes into higher relief. Ironically enough, the unsatisfactory pieces belong to a

⁸ See "Scottish Poetry in 1968," *SSL* Vol. VI, No. 4 (April 1969), pp. 199-203.

genre where Mr. MacCaig has often triumphed in the past, the meta-physical love-poem. Perhaps he has become rather over-confident, tripping over his own feet while walking along the beaten track without taking sufficient care to avoid pitfalls. At all events, in a number of these poems ("It's Hopeless," "Sure Proof," "Transformations") he seems to be less concerned with love than with playing conjuring-tricks with ideas about it, and when lack of passionate concentration leads to the conjurer's eye straying, he drops the eggs. The whimpering conclusions of such pieces are at the opposite extreme from his usual explosive endings.

But what makes this collection such a notable milestone in Mr. MacCaig's progress is that most of its successes are not usual to him at all, but result from novel developments in his work. One such departure from his former concentration on "the egotistical sublime" is a concern with and for other people, and there are two superb examples here, "Uncle Roderick" and "Mrs. Grant," which have the added fascination of being as different from one another as a running tide from a rock-pool at the ebb. "Uncle Roderick" is written with a direct simplicity of praise which only the most delicate technical command could prevent from appearing fulsome rather than finely appropriate.

He was strong as the red bull.
He moved like a dancer.
He was a cran of songs.

On the other hand, in "Mrs. Grant," an elegy for a junkie Jezebel, understatement is carried so far as to seem itself almost a kind of excess, with the result that some readers may be deceived into considering the poem a satire rather than what it is, a lamentation which scrupulously avoids the slightest suspicion of the easy tear. The clue towards the proper appreciation of "Mrs. Grant" lies in some remarks made by Mr. MacCaig about a not dissimilar work by another poet—"Sympathy with the lamentable death . . . is nowhere made explicit. It lies behind the harsh directness of the statements and the apparent brutality of the humour. But it's there. It's made available (to me, at least) by the *tone* of the poem, which is related to the very Scottish habit of disguising a true affection behind an outspoken coarseness which I myself have seen bamboozling interested foreigners."⁴

Equally novel in Mr. MacCaig is a fascination with the dark forest of history from which we have fought our way into the differently-dangerous clearing of the present, and in "Old Edinburgh" he presents pulsating images of both the glamour and the grimness of the past.

⁴ *Akros*, No. 9, p. 68.

History is there again as an essential background to his extended poem, "A Man in Assynt"—originally commissioned for B.B.C. television—where the passion behind his view of Highland people in their native landscape and seascape gives his free-verse lines their compelling rhythmical force and sensuous energy.

To write at length is another new departure for Mr. MacCaig, and another extended poem, "No End, No Beginning," is perhaps his most remarkable work to date, combining his subtle perception of natural beauty and his delighted appreciation of the enlivening qualities of love with a profound visionary insight into the fundamental unity of all modes of being.

Such a web of likenesses. No matter
how many times removed, I am cousin
to volcanoes and leafbuds, and the heron
devouring a frog eats a bloodbrother of
suns and gravestones.

Most of the successful poems in *A Man in My Position* are written in free forms, but some of the few pieces in regular stanzas are no less striking, particularly "So Many Summers," a moving meditation on the power of the passage of Time to reduce apparent differences—a rotting boat, a crumbling animal skeleton—to seeming identity. In this poem, and in many others, the identification between the poet and his themes is complete. The collection received a Scottish Arts Council publication award.

Sydney Tremayne (b. 1912) shows evocative evidence of a similar gift in his fifth collection, *The Turning Sky* (Rupert Hart-Davis, London), with highly sensuous poems expressing his vision of the world of nature or musing on personal and family experiences. When Mr. Tremayne contents himself with describing, instead of combining vision and view-point, his stanzas can seem rather too smooth, too mellifluous, but when his heart and mind are involved as well as his eye, the rhythms quicken and impel, and the decorative gives way to a directness where the illuminating image functions integrally rather than as an added attraction.

His range of feeling is wide, from the desolation of "North of Berwick" ("Through all our absences the long tide surges") to the half-humorous resolve of "The Hare" ("This wilderness supports a hare;/ It also may support a man"), from the pity and love of "Earth Spirits" ("Hares . . . hold their ground by knowing where to run") to the satirical celebration of necessary ignorance in "A Night Fire Call" ("I think the power of darkness is our salvation./ If I'd seen where

I was I'd have broken my neck"). The last of these demonstrates that Mr. Tremayne is a master of the conversational style as well as the more mannered, and the wit which is not without an element of brutality in that poem (and which can sometimes seem not uncontrived) is elsewhere extremely pretty in its point—as in the five-line sketch of his father "Riding, erect and solemn, his twenty-six-year-old bicycle." Other parental poems, however, are moving elegies for the loss of love, expressed (as in "Stone Walls") with telling simplicity—

Two songsters ill adapted to one cage
Sang here and brought a third upon the stage
Before the singing died.

Throughout his career, Mr. Tremayne's control of form has always been notable, and he now shows himself capable of the extended meditation ("Details from a Death Certificate") as well as the brief lyric. It remains to be seen whether the subjects which he has been exploring for a quarter of a century can continue to provide him with novel discoveries. He received a Scottish Arts Council publication award for the present volume.

Exploration of the natural scene is also a concern of Maurice Lindsay (b. 1918), and if his latest collection, *This Business of Living* (Akros Publications, Preston, Lancashire), is more uneven than Mr. Tremayne's, at its best it is equally remarkable. Yet Mr. Lindsay sometimes spoils the simple adequacy of a descriptive poem by trying to elevate it into intellectual significance by means of a moralistic conclusion which is too trite to be felt as true ("Barcarolle"), and when he attempts to interpret experience in philosophical terms throughout a poem's course there are occasions when he gasps and flounders like a fish out of water ("On a Postcard"). In those latter passages, too, his style tends to slacken, to lose rhythmical urgency and dexterity, while his characteristic trick of juggling with parts of speech—often employed with such skilful sleight-of-hand that the reader is scarcely aware of the means whereby the powerful impact he creates has achieved its end—becomes clumsy and unconvincing ("In the Cheviots").

But when Mr. Lindsay is on form, and description and action are left to speak for themselves, he produces work which succeeds on every level, technically, emotionally and intellectually. His senses are vividly alive to the sights and sounds and scents of the natural world, and when he refrains from trying to tease them into patterns of metaphysical explanation he is able to allow his gift for seizing upon essential details to create a design which is itself sufficient interpretation of the experi-

ence which the poem enshrines—as in the lyrical loveliness of "Stones in Sky and Water."

The synthesis of beauty and cruelty, ruthlessness and pity, action and thought and feeling in "At the Mouth of the Ardyne" is expressed with such nicely controlled economy that the poem is into the heart like a honed dagger through the ribs before the reader realises that the point has struck. This work is as penetratingly perceptive about humanity as it is about the world of nature, and the best pieces in *This Business of Living* show a widening and deepening of Mr. Lindsay's range in this kind. He encompasses the ambiguities of art and love in "A Ballad of Orpheus," and the brutal defeat of love by hatred in "Glasgow Nocturne," poems which reveal that his talent is still developing, still discovering novel themes in the world around it and new ways of expressing them through its own capacity for successful experiment.

Another successful experiment is the interweaving of prose and poetry by George Mackay Brown (b. 1921) in his *Orkney Tapestry* (Gollancz, London), which expresses a singular vividness of vision. Beginning with a series of bird's eye glimpses of landscape and folk, he then concentrates on how the communal life of shared centuries has shaped place and people in one particular valley, Rackwick, of which he writes a history that has all the qualities of legend. In verse and prose alike, this chapter is an enchantment to read, even although the action is often tragic—"evil is universal, and the simpler the society the starker it appears"—and the end is emptiness, with only one farm left operating in the whole valley. For the dark irony involved in the kind of "progress" which has resulted in the depopulation of those far islands, Mr. Mackay Brown finds the desolate image of the deserted hearth.

At Burnmouth the door hangs from a broken hinge
And the fire is out.

The window at Shore empty sockets
And the hearth coldness. . . .

The poor and the good fires are all quenched.
Now, cold angel, keep the valley
From the bedlam and cinders of a Black Pentecost.

Even the little hope which the author can create with regard to the chance of families returning to Rackwick is scarcely less terrible than despair—"It could happen that the atom-and-planet horror at the heart of our civilisation will scatter people again to the quiet beautiful fertile places of the world." But our civilisation has always had some horror at its heart, as Mr. Mackay Brown's chapter on the Orkney Vikings, "The Transfixed Dragon," shows him to be penetratingly aware in his pow-

erful account of their plunderings and slaughters, where his own poems, "tough, rich, passionate, witty,"⁵ enhance the prose narrative as much as his taut translations from the Norse.

Against all expectation, however, that Viking horror gave birth to holiness, when the political murder of Earl Magnus was recognised as a martyrdom and the new saint became the inspiration behind the building of Kirkwall Cathedral. Mr. Mackay Brown relates this marvelous story partly in narrative, partly in verse, and partly in dramatic form, making it at once historical and contemporary with ourselves. His style is superbly simple, combining conciseness with clarity in phrases which are both functional and fine. For this volume—as for his short-story collection, *A Time to Keep* (The Hogarth Press, London, 1969)—he received a Scottish Arts Council publication award.

A similar award went to Tom Buchan (b. 1931) for his first book, *Dolphins at Cochin* (Barrie and Rockliff and The Cresset Press, London). One of his most effective poems, a fine fusion of sensuous affirmation and intellectual questioning, is called "Doubting Thomas," and his starting-point as a writer is from a position of disenchantment so extreme as to be almost total. Sometimes, indeed, he gets stuck on that start and stays there running on the spot of facile cynicism ("World-citizen," "Wedding Day"), but when passion impels him forward his progress is all the more impressive for having to be fought for against the restraints of disillusion. The wry comedy of "Scotland the Wee," a satire on "this land of the millionaire draper, whiskey vomit and the Hillman Imp," which is briefly etched in acid, with a sting in every phrase, modulates into the ironic self-criticism of "The Week-End Naturalist," where he combines a MacCaigish appreciation of the Highland scene with a keenly individual analysis of his own imperfections as its explorer.

Mr. Buchan's range of theme and subject-matter is impressive, from the imaginative limitations of astronauts to the physical and psychological emptiness of a Scottish beach, and in most of his work an essential integrity of approach enables him to avoid the slightest suspicion of an inflated style and to write with a stark precision which nevertheless hits upon the *mot juste* with striking effect. For while he is a highly intelligent writer, Mr. Buchan is well aware that man cannot live by mind alone, and his speculations seldom lose touch with sensuous experience—

⁵ Norman MacCaig and Alexander Scott, "Introduction," *Contemporary Scottish Verse 1959-1969* (Calder & Boyars, London, 1970), p. 20.

one needs the shepherd boy
 unwashed on his yellow hill
 and the fierce sunlight
 drawing music from his bitter pipe.

A much more prolific poet than Mr. Buchan, Robin Fulton (b. 1937) published his third collection of original verse, *Inventories* (Caithness Books, Thurso, Caithness), only eighteen months after his second, and all of its forty-three poems were written in a period of not much more than a year, from August 1967 to December 1968. This means that Time—famous as a healer, but equally effective as a winnower—has had little opportunity to persuade the author that some of his poems are less achieved than others and might merit revision (or even, in some cases, complete suppression). As a result, *Inventories* is marred by the inclusion of a number of pieces where ideas have failed to ignite when rubbed together ("A Lifework," "Variable Terrors"), or where emotions with insufficient impetus to maintain their flight fall into spinning nose-dives ("A Conversation," "Looking the Other Way"), or where techniques are not quite dazzling enough to avoid betraying the tricks behind their expertise ("Landscape," "What He'd Say").

But even after its not infrequent failures have been discounted, *Inventories* remains an impressive volume, distinguishing its author as the most variously talented poet of his age-group. Mr. Fulton's range of themes is matched by a most delicately focussed intensity of vision, and an admirable conciseness enables him to express his insights in the minimum of space and yet with no sacrifice of either clarity or passion. As in "How to Survive," which contrasts the appearance of a waterdrop to the naked eye with its magnified revelation as "a vast world of interrelated life"—

consider fortunate noah
 one thing he might have taken
 along with his stud menagerie
 was a specimen waterdrop
 to demonstrate the true nature
 of the murderous element he rode

A keen-sighted appreciation of the significant details of the Scottish landscape issues in highly individual poems where appearances become symbols of emotional and intellectual experiences, as in "A Discovery," a love-poem which moves out from personal passion to embrace the whole world of being, and in "Remote," where the apparent liberty of escape into the natural scene is contrasted with the impossibility of leaving one's prepossessions behind. In "A Meticulous Observer," he

transforms his awareness of his own weaknesses into a source of strength, and in "Attic Finds" he expresses the transitoriness of youth in an image which is as finely original as it is illuminating, while "Clearing Up" reveals the strangeness of the familiar self with a seeming simplicity which nevertheless penetrates to the inner depths of the personality. One of the most effective poems in the book is called "A Man with a Lucky Gift," and while it is not intended as a self-portrait its title could and should be applied to its author.

Another to whom it would be no less appropriate is Alan Jackson (b. 1938). Most of the achieved poems in his *The Grim Wayfarer* (Fulcrum Press, London) had already appeared in the thirty-page selection of his work included in *Penguin Modern Poets 12* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968),⁶ but there are others which provide fresh demonstrations of his gifts for the satirical or the comic miniature, either in English ("Person") or in vernacular Scots ("Hitch-haiku"), for the impassioned assault on arid intellectualism ("The Newton Man"), for the blunt assertion of brute fact ("Hero trek"), for the mythological expression of the struggle between power and love ("The Duke of Ire"), and for the lyrical celebration of rooted earthiness ("Digging"). But the present writer is not the first critic to feel that Mr. Jackson's work has suffered from his membership of a poetry-reading circuit, with a consequent "sacrifice [of] coherence for superficial impact"⁷ and an over-frequent employment of the more obvious rhythms. There is some intellectual confusion in his work, too, in the conflict between a Rousseauist belief in the natural man and a conviction of human depravity ("The Worstest Beast") which is both catholic and calvinist.

While successes outweigh failures in the foregoing volumes, the reverse is the case in the following collections written entirely in English. The Scottish Arts Council gave a publication award to D. M. Black (b. 1941) for *The Educators* (Barrie and Rockliff and The Cresset Press, London), but only two of the poems, the first and the last, are fully achieved—"The Educators," a satirical fable on the destruction of innocence by experience, and "Story of the old man of Manikingo," a celebratory fable on the power of personal creativity. Other mythological narratives, in the volume's first section, are either incoherent ("Tancred Restored," "Document of an Inter-Stellar Journey") or badly balanced ("Anna's Affairs," where an intrusion of sexual detail clogs the pace). In the second section, where he attempts the

⁶ See "Scottish Poetry in 1968," *SSL* vol. VI, No. 4, p. 205.

⁷ Douglas Gifford, *Lines Review*, No. 31, p. 46.

lyric, Mr. Black exchanges modish ambiguity for unfashionable directness, but at the same time he declines into the prosaic; and the swatches of autobiography in the third section are not only without form, but void of interest to anyone other than the autobiographer. Mr. Black's admired master, George MacBeth (b. 1931), produced in *A War Quartet* (Macmillan, London) his third volume in as many years—a triumph of industry rather than inspiration. On the other hand, *Conditions* (The Byron Press, Nottingham) by G. S. Fraser (b. 1914) is his first collection in two decades; but almost all its contents are academic—in the pejorative sense of that ambiguous adjective.

Although *Terry Street* (Faber, London) by Douglas Dunn (b. 1942) was a Poetry Book Society choice, it shows rather more promise than performance, its deliberate restraint preventing the full flower of what one suspects—on the evidence of magazine poems not included here—to be a more extrovert talent than is revealed in these carefully-controlled vignettes of city scenes. Hints of better work to come also occur in pamphlets of verse by Menzies McKillop (b. 1929) and James Rankin (b. 1939) published as Nos. 3 and 4 of the Parklands Poets series (Akros Publications, Preston, Lancashire). Another new series, "Modern Scottish Poets," published by Caithness Books, Thurso, issued as its second volume a collection by Charles Senior (b. 1918), where the verse varies from the mild to the mediocre.

At the other extreme, Alan Bold (b. 1943) oscillates between infrequent excellence and remorselessly recurring rhetorical rant, betrayed into the latter by his belief that "Our voices are not made for singing now/ But for straight-talking." Unfortunately, his idea of straight-talking is to reiterate liberal clichés and the commonplaces of the radical reviews in a style even less distinguished than his sources for harmony of rhythm or vividness of imagery. *The State of the Nation* (Chatto and Windus and The Hogarth Press), which purports to be an extended poem on the human condition but consists of a variety of shorter pieces on assorted political and sociological themes cobbled together so crudely that every stitch shows, constitutes some seventy pages of dreary dullness, in matter and manner alike, almost unrelieved except for forty lines about a second-hand bookshop, where—for once—he is writing out of experience rather than closed intellectual conviction and where the warmth of human sympathy is nicely tempered by witty intelligence, with the simplicity of the style matched by a clear flow of movement.

A few poems of similar quality go some way towards redeeming the incompetence of the large majority of the verses in his other 1969

collection, *A Perpetual Motion Machine* (Chatto and Windus and The Hogarth Press). "A Memory of Death," a lament for a drunken father who was "found drowned" in an Orkney quarry, is made all the more moving by the grave restraint of the style, with almost prosaic rhythms through which the passion of grief pierces with stabbing impact, and "The Realm of Touching," a love-poem, combines unexpectedly evocative images with an equally unusual tenderness. But most of the longer pieces, all too extensively, are clumsy, or banal, or pompous, or puerile—or all at once. The selection from his work in *Penguin Poets 15* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex) is characteristic of his contrasting qualities.

A justifiably exasperated critic recently described Mr. Bold as "sounding like a parody of Hugh MacDiarmid (that wide-ranging genius) at his awful worst, regurgitating a passage out of some text-book,"⁸ and the Father of Modern Scottish Poetry has produced a few dead ducks among those of his progeny collected in *A Clyack-Sheaf* (Macgibbon and Kee, London). But this volume of verse in Scots and English also contains work of genius, from the early "To hell wi' happiness!" (first published in *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, 1930), a grim Scots gauntlet flung in the face of conservatism, to the late "The Ross-Shire Hills," a celebration of the mysteriousness of creativity which conceals its complexity in the seemingly-simple and expresses its visionary amplitude in a style of comic concision.

What are the hills of Ross-shire like?
Listen. I'll tell you. Over the snow one day
I went out with my gun. A hare popped up
On a hill-top not very far away.

I shot it at once. It came rolling down
And round it as it came a snowball grew,
Which, when I kicked it open, held not one
But seventeen hares. Believe me or not. It's true.

Among the extended poems in English, "In Berwickshire Again" is masterly in its evocation of contrasting Scottish scenes, and "When the Birds Come Back to Rhiannon" pulses with a passionate poetical patriotism which even an overload of Celtic mythology fails to muffle. As against these, the more overtly political poems seem poor—"The International Brigade" is vitiated by a sentimentality as extreme as all of MacDiarmid's attitudes, "For Daniel Cohn-Bendit" expresses anarchist ideas in the indiscipline of bad prose, and "England's Double Knavery" is broken-backed under a weight of quotations and literary

⁸ Maurice Lindsay, *Akros*, No. 11, p. 71.

references. These represent the ashy aspect of MacDiarmid's volcano; when the burning lava flows, adverse criticism is entirely consumed.

Two slighter collections in Scots and English appear as Nos. 1 and 2 of the Parklands Poets series, by Eric Gold (b. 1927) and George Hardie (b. 1933) respectively. Mr. Gold's scope ranges from the passionate intelligence of "Empedocles in Princes Street" to the nicely understated irony of "The Bourgeois Thing" and from the driving macaronics of "Dunbar's Maen" to the controlled despair of "To an Insomniac." Some of Mr. Hardie's Scots poems—"Twa Men Fell" and "Graffiti"—are at once admirably direct and formally powerful, held together by the pressure of emotional force, but when this strength slackens, as sometimes in Scots and often in English, the verse falls apart into chopped-up prose. A similarly bilingual volume by David Morrison (b. 1941), *The White Hind*, is the first of Caithness Books' "Modern Scottish Poets" series, of which Mr. Morrison is general editor. Most of his work in Scots is ruined by a technical incompetence which makes it impossible for him to prevent his verse from clotting into incomprehensibility or crumbling into almost-illiterate prose. In English he has one fine poem, "Dance, Glenna," which possesses both passion and control, and a single passable piece in Scots, "The Root," shows his awareness of the root of the matter in poetry, but the rest of *The White Hind* only demonstrates how far the root is from the flower.

Of collections entirely in Scots, only two were published in the course of the year, and neither is consistently successful. Sydney Goodsir Smith (b. 1915) is the most prolific, the most passionate and the most powerful of the so-called Lallans Makars, the generation of poets who published their first books during or just after the Second World War, but *Fifteen Poems and a Play* (Southside Publications, Edinburgh), which draws on work written over the past two decades, is the most unequal volume he has produced since he ceased to be an apprentice. The verse play for radio, "The Stick-Up," suffers from a predictability of plot made all the more apparent by the inflation of the dialogue, an extended poem commissioned by the B.B.C., "The Twa Brigs," fails to span its length in significant style, a song on whisky, "Take Aff Your Dram," is little more than a catalogue of distilleries, and a song on sex, "The Kimmers o' Cougate," is neither clean nor clever.

Alongside these disasters, the achieved creations are all the more astonishing. In "Three" (on Lenin's statement, "Three men make a revolution") Mr. Goodsir Smith has written an anti-political poem which puts a whole revolutionary tradition to the question by means of a savage series of queries which are at once loaded, deadly and direct; in

"The Kenless Strand" he sketches a vision of doomed love in lines which are as bare as they are pictorially precise, and where sense and sound are indissolubly fused together; and in "The Reid Reid Rose" the dragging rhythms echo the despair of the central image of "the weary, burnin rose." But too many of the best of Mr. Goodsir Smith's recent poems are absent from this volume.

The author of the second Scots collection, *Kythings* (Caithness Books, Thurso, Caithness), writes under the pseudonym of "Ronald Eadie Munro" but has recently revealed himself to be Duncan Glen (b. 1933), editor of *Akros* poetry magazine and publisher of Akros Publications. In this case the use of a pen-name can be justified, or at least excused, on the argument that two poets are represented in *Kythings* rather than simply one. First there is Mr. Glen, who writes autobiographical poems about the actualities of his own experience, as in "My Faither," an elegy of such profound simplicity that it is almost an impertinence to comment on its skill, or as in "Ceremonial," where the sight of a dead mouse leads to an appreciation of the intermingledness of "the bricht colours o life and daith" expressed with a delicate restraint which still contains both pity and affirmation. Then there is Munro—a name chosen for its association with Scottish summits?—who writes visionary poems on his relationship with the Muse, where sky-imagery combines and contrasts with images of "glaur" (mud) and brute vitality in his striving to express the paradoxical association of idealism with the foulest fact. None of these latter poems is entirely successful, for their sense is sometimes as clouded as the skies that arch over their maker, but they bear witness to an endeavour to interweave the actual with the imaginative which is all the more admirable for the infrequency with which post-medieval poetry in Scots has made the attempt. Mr. Glen's Scots medium reads like a living language, not a literary lingo—a good augury for his future.

In the annual round-up of Scottish verse edited by George Bruce, Maurice Lindsay and Edwin Morgan, the anthology *Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press), which has now reached its fourth number, almost all the best poems are either elegies or satires or combinations of both. Among the elegists are such kenspeckle figures as Bold, Buchan, Fulton, Lindsay, MacCaig, Tremayne, Alan Riddell and the present writer, with such emergent poets as David Fergus, Giles Gordon, Hektor Tait, Robert Tait and Rory Watson; and among the satirists Buchan, Fulton and A. Scott (again), together with Jackson, both Morgans (Edwin and Pete), Keith Murdoch and Simon Weller. Pow-

erful poems which fit into neither category are contributed by Hugh MacDiarmid and an interesting newcomer, A. S. Martin.

But one's gratitude to the anthology's editors for presenting so many grisly and/or gleeful additions to the grimness and/or gaiety of the nation is tempered by irritation at their having included some poems which are too dull, or too slight, to make much (if any) effect, and others which are opaque to the point of incomprehensibility. Another cause for dissatisfaction is the poor quality of most of the all-too-few original poems in Scots, which are much less than adequate as a reflection of the year's work in Scots verse.

For this, the reader is recommended to take the magazine *Akros*, which published Scots versions of Gaelic, Russian, Italian, Latin and Afrikaans originals translated by George Campbell Hay, Edwin Morgan, Alastair Mackie, Robert Garioch and T. S. Law (No. 9); produced a "Sydney Goodsir Smith Issue" (No. 10) with nine new Scots poems by the man himself, articles on his work by Hugh MacDiarmid, Garioch and the present writer, and Scots verse by Tom Scott, Alexander Scott (once more, ye laurels!), J. K. Annand, Law, Eadie Munro, Hardie, Gold and Mackie (a translation of Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre"); and included Scots poems by—among others who are too mediocre to mention—Campbell Hay and Gold in a "General Poetry Issue" (No. 11) which also contained around fifty poems in English. Some savage satire in Scots by Tom Scott featured in the nationalist political quarterly, *Catalyst*, alongside equally attacking Gaelic verse by Campbell Hay; and *Scottish International* found room for one Scots poem each by Goodsir Smith and Garioch (who is one of the magazine's three editors).

For reasons unknown, the editor of *Lines Review*, Robin Fulton, did not include a single Scots poem in his three issues of 1969—a fact about which he appeared singularly unrepentant when it was brought to his notice by *Akros*. Apart from this notable omission, however, the magazine ranged widely, with translations from Russian and Czech alongside the English versions of Sorley Maclean's Gaelic in No. 28—which also published original poems in English by Jackson, Crichton Smith and yours truly; work in Gaelic as well as in English in the Crichton Smith issue (No. 29); and poems by a young American, Lanette Miller, as well as verse by George Bruce (notably novel), Stewart Conn (the mixture as before), yours repetitively (no comment), and Alasdair Maclean—the most outstanding newcomer of the year—in No. 30. In 1970, *Lines* is to become a quarterly, and its January issue has already appeared, with seven translations from Hungarian

(into English) by Edwin Morgan and eleven new poems by MacCaig—but again without anything in Scots. However, a private assurance that Robert Garioch is to contribute Scots verse to the March issue is as welcome as the news that Caithness Books will publish his latest collection in the course of the year.

The battle continues.

Glasgow University